DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 675 SO 016 417

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TITLE A Convention for High School Psychology Students.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conferences; Extracurricular Activities; Higher Education; High Schools; *Psychology; Public Speaking; *Student Projects; Student Research

ABSTRACT

Conventions offer high school psychology students an opportunity to meet psychology students from other schools, present projects developed in class, and have those projects evaluated by students and teachers from other schools. If the convention is held on a college campus, as was the one described in this paper, the college also gains by familiarizing high school students with its campus. A successful convention requires the involvement of teachers in planning, determining policy, evaluating projects, and acting as session chairs. Necessary planning includes setting a date, sending out a call for papers, helping students develop appropriate projects, setting up the program, publicizing the convention, designing certificates, and coordinating the convention with the college where it is held. (IS)

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A CONVENTION FOR HIGH SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

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August 1984

SP 016 417

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).

A Convention for High School Psychology Students[1]

Samuel M. Cameron

Beaver College

This presentation addresses a level of the teaching of psychology with which many A.P.A. members are unfamiliar: the teaching of psychology in the high school. It focuses on one particular teaching strategy that provides the high school student with a unique learning experience: the psychology convention.

A large number of high schools are now offering courses in psychology to their students. Psychology has been taught in the high schools since at least the 1830's but enrollments and the number of courses dramatically increased in the 60's and 70's. The fall 1980 update of the National Science Teachers Association's U.S. Registry identifies 9,139 psychology teachers in the United States and its jurisdictions. APA estimates the number as close to 10,000. These teachers are offering psychology courses in over 5,000 high schools to over 500,000 students a year. The courses tend to approach psychology as a social science and emphasize personality, adjustment, and interpersonal relations.

During the 70's I had the good fortune to be funded by the National Science Foundation to conduct several projects for high school psychology teachers. These projects drew together high school teachers from across the country. Many of the teachers

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[1] Paper presented at the 92nd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, August 27, 1984.

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spoke about their feelings of isolation. Usually they were the only person teaching psychology in their high school and frequently in their district. Unlike their fellow biology or english teacher they lacked the opportunity to interact with a colleague to trade notes and exchange experiences. Such isolation was felt even more deeply by these teachers because of nagging feelings of inadequacy. Many felt ill-prepared to teach the course as they often had had only a few psychology courses in college. Because of such needs some of the local participants in the first NSF project and I formed the Delaware Valley Association of High School Psychology Teachers. The high school psychology student convention grew out of these events.

The major purpose of the Delaware Valley group was to meet the needs of the teachers. Meeting several times a year, it gave them a sense of professional identity, the occasion to trade ideas, the chance to learn of new or different teaching techniques, and an opportunity to increase and update their knowledge of the discipline. The teachers, however, also wished such an organization to benefit not only them, but also their students. The idea of a student convention was thus born.

Over the last six years, [illegible]ver College and the Delaware Valley Association have conducted such a convention. The purpose of the convention is to provide a culminating occasion for the projects high school students have been doing in their psychology classes. Its objectives are to promote interest in psychology as a science and to introduce high school students to one mode of scientific communication typical of the discipline. The high school teachers find the goal of presenting a project at a

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convention a way of increasing student interest and motivation in the various course projects.

Conventions at this level do differ in their purpose and nature from conventions at higher levels. The high school convention is primarily a learning experience. The presenting student is practicing communicative skills while the students in the audience are learning about selected topics in psychology. All are learning that conventions are a unique mode of communication used by the sciences and professions. The presentations are rarely original contributions to the discipline and to expect them to be so would be unrealistic.

The psychology department at Beaver College has co-sponsored such a convention over the years. There are real benefits to a department and a college for acting in such a role. Not only is it providing a service to the local high schools, but a psychology convention held on campus can serve as a significant admissions device. Not only does a convention give the college publicity in the local media, but, more importantly, it brings high school students, teachers and parents on campus and introduces them to the college. Increased name recognition, and positive feelings toward the college are likely to result.

If you are interested in organizing such a convention in your area, careful groundwork must be done. You cannot have a successful convention without involving the teachers. I was lucky to have an organization such as the Delaware Valley Association in my area. If you do not have such a group in your area then the department must locate and contact each of the teachers in the local high schools. This may not be as easy as

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it seems. Not all high schools offer psychology courses and the course is sometimes listed under a different title than psychology.

Once you have located the psychology teachers in your area then you must interest some in serving on a committee that would oversee and help run the convention. The role of such a committee is to determine policy, to review and select projects for the convention, and to provide session chairs during the convention. Serving on the committee will involve several evenings' work and being present during the actual convention. It is likely that the bulk of projects submitted to the convention will come from the students of these high school teacher committee members, so make the committee as broad as possible.

Once the interest is generated and the foundation laid, the success or failure of the convention will depend upon careful preliminary organization. Again the advice of the high school teacher committee members will be invaluable.

Setting a date. The date of the convention is extremely important. It should be late enough in the year or semester that the teachers and students have adequate time to do meaningful projects. Yet it should not be so late in the semester that it conflicts with senior proms, senior class trips or final exams. A weekday is good as many high school students work or have other obligations on the weekend. The date should also not conflict with other activities on campus. Make sure that there will be adequate classroom and parking space available and that your date is not the same as that of the alumni reunion. We have found a

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spring date immediately following the college's final exam period to be optimal.

The call for papers. A call for papers is mailed to the local high school teachers in the fall. It sets the date for the convention, the deadline for project submissions, the format for the submissions and the criteria by which they will be reviewed. We modeled our call for papers after that of the Eastern Psychological Association.

Projects. Although a large number of the projects will be experiments or studies, all need not be. A number of projects have been case studies based upon field work in hospitals and special schools. Some good projects have been based on interviews. Special projects, such as mazes and other demonstrations are encouraged to involve the non-verbal student. We have found that traditional term papers do not make good materials for a convention format and discourage them.

Teachers can help their students get ideas for projects from a number of sources. One excellent source is Psychology Today. Another very good book in which to find ideas is Benjamin and Lowman's (1981), Activities Handbook for the Teaching of Psychology. One teacher has her students look through recent issues of Psychological Abstracts.

Most students find doing experiments and fieldwork fascinating. The goal of presenting their work at a convention adds to their zest. If the teacher feels that additional motivation is desirable, extra credit points might be used for such projects. A number of teachers use a contracting system in which students contract for an A if they do a project in addition

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to the regular requirements of the course. Students can also be reminded that presenting a project at a convention would look very good on their college applications.

Selection of projects. The organizing committee meets to select the projects for the convention from among those submitted. The committee should bear in mind that the projects are those of high school students and that the criteria for selection should not be as rigorous as those that would be applied to more advanced students. Nevertheless, the projects should be judged according to standards of excellence and only those worthy selected for the convention. The committee should be especially alert to ethical concerns and reject any projects that violate ethical standards. The review should be considered a teaching process and students whose projects are rejected should be given a brief explanation of how the project could have been improved. Usually an effort is made to include some projects from all schools that submitted to the convention.

Program. The size of the program will depend on how many projects are selected. Ordinarily, there will be enough to divide projects into categories such as experimental, social, personality, and clinical. It is desirable to have an exhibits section for projects of a non-verbal nature. The high school teachers can be invaluable in the preparation of a printed program. They can usually find a typing class to type it, an art class to design and produce a cover, and a printing class to print it.

Publicity. The convention can be publicized in local media, especially small home town newspapers. Psychology students from

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high schools not represented in the convention should be invited to attend. Parents of participating students should be invited by the student's high school teacher. The college photographer should be present during the convention to take pictures of the participants and exhibits. The resultant photos should be sent to the appropriate local newspapers by the college's public relations office.

Certificates. Our committee decided to award all participants with a printed certificate of participation suitable for framing. Again, one of the high school teachers can usually find a printing class that will do the certificates as a class project.

Amenities. It is important that the campus be presented in a favorable light and that the participants and their guests be made to feel at home. Appropriate offices on campus such as the switchboard (for inquiries), security (for parking), and maintainence (for cleaning and setting up) should be notified of the convention. The college cafeteria and snack bar should be alerted to expect extra people. A brief welcoming speech by the Department Chair and/or Dean is a nice touch. The Admissions Office should leave admission information at a central spot. In general, remember that each participant is a prospective student.

I hope that I have been able to interest you in having your own high school student psychology convention. If you do I am sure that you will find it a rewarding experience. Let me know of your results and ideas.

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Benjamin, L. T. and Lowman, K. D., (Eds.), (1981), Activities handbook for the teaching of psychology. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.

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